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AHMED AGA TÄMRAŠLIJATA:
THE LAST DEREBEY OF THE RHODOPES

Few regions in Bulgaria have as strong a feeling of their own specificity as the Rhodopes. This is, of course, due first to the region's physical characteristics, crowded as it is with chaotic mountain ranges, covered with thick forests, and isolated for want of a communications system; but the main attribute of the Rhodopes is that it is "the oldest and most mysterious part of Bulgaria." This is not a reference to the area's geological age and shadowed forests but to a kind of historical depth: the country perpetually looks into its remotest past, into its Thracian origins.

This romantic view of the Rhodopes surfaced in the nineteenth century, exalting the figure of Orpheus, the Thracien poet inspired by nature. It found expression in a work of literary forgery known as "Veda Slovena," mythological folk songs, published in 1874 and 1881, in which ancient names, such as Orfen, were to be found complete with Sanskrit roots. (Some Bulgarian scholars still assume this work to be authentic.) At that time the Rhodopes were almost *terra incognita* for western scholars and for the young Bulgarian intelligentsia as well. With the exception of a few Christian villages, such as Čepelare, Široka Lăka, Rajkovo and Ustovo (the latter two now united, forming the town of Smoljan), the Rhodopes did not participate in the general Bulgarian national revival of the nineteenth century. The reason for this was not only the natural difficulty of communication in the region, but also the fact that the majority of the population was Muslim Turkish-speaking in the east (Arda valley), Bulgarian-speaking in the west.

The Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, the Pomaks, seemed especially mysterious, and it is no wonder that the apocryphal "Veda Slovena" was ascribed to them. The leaders of the Bulgarian revival ignored the Pomaks for a long time. This should not surprise us, as the Bulgarian renaissance was, in its first phase, a religious and cultural movement of reaction against the dominating Hellenism of the Orthodox church. As it progressed, this renaissance became more national and less religious, so that community of language little by little came to seem more important than differences of religion; but this evolution was only embryonic under the *millet*-system of Ottoman rule, becoming more definitive after independence in 1878.

The first Bulgarian to consider the existence of the Pomaks as a group (and not as a mere series of individual conversions to Islam) was, apparently, Vasil Aprilov, who in 1841 estimated their number to be approximately 50,000. Georgi Rakovski mentioned them in 1856 and deplored their lack of national feeling, as they were not interested in independence. Ljuben Karavelov in 1867 put their population at 500,000. Statements

about the Pomaks in the Bulgarian press (*Carigradski Vestnik*, *Dunavska Zora*) during those years were very vague and confused.¹

The first real concern about integrating the Pomak population into the general movement of Bulgarian revival appeared in 1869 in the correspondence of Najden Gerov, the Bulgarian-born Russian vice-consul in Plovdiv. The initiative for the concern, however, seems to have been that of the Russian embassy in Istanbul, which was worried about possible Polish propaganda among the Pomaks (on the basis of the phonetic similarity between Poljak and Pomak!). In a letter dated 8 October 1869, Gerov reassures Count Ignatiev on this point, but suggests that some action is needed:

But the idea of nationality is spreading so quickly, that it may soon catch on among the Pomaks too. This is why, if it is necessary to prevent the undesirable development of the above-mentioned idea [Polish propaganda] among them and to give it the appropriate direction, indispensable measures must be taken soon.²

In order to have a direct effect on the "*kulturträger*" among the Pomaks, he suggests, some of their literate people ought to be employed as *kjatibs* (Turkish secretaries) at the vice-consulate or as teachers of Turkish—if not in schools, then for individuals, who would be able to convert them to the national cause. It is paradoxical that the first attempt to integrate the Pomaks proposed to use their (very relative) knowledge of Turkish as a bridge. In another letter, dated 15 December 1869, Gerov makes the following suggestions:

In the places and villages inhabited both by Pomaks and Bulgarians, one might send to the latter, schoolteachers to spread propaganda among the Pomaks. But the municipalities of these places and villages are not able to pay the teachers' fees, which they are liable to ask for in return for the responsibility they are taking. So they will have to be subsidized.

In conclusion, I am forced to add that, considering the impression which I made on the Pomaks during my short stay among them in Čepino, where I went last years to bathe, it would be very useful if I were to be allowed from time to time to travel through those places inhabited by the Pomaks under different pretexts such as, for example, hunting, collecting antiques, etc. One might object that my travels will provoke the suspicion of the Turkish government. Indeed, the Turkish government cannot but consider with suspicion the rounds of Russian agents, but in my experience this suspicion will be completely overcome if each time I borrow from the local authorities one or two zapties, the presence of whom, if one is clever enough, will not be the least disturbing.³

Thus, even though a real concern for the future of the Pomaks was expressed, nothing was really done at that time to integrate them into the Bulgarian national

¹Kiril Vasilev, *Rodopskite bālgari mohamedani* (Plovdiv, 1961), pp. 232-45.

²Petār Petrov, *Po sledite na nasilieto* (Sofia, 1972), pp. 396-97.

³*Ibid.*, p. 396.

revival movement. With the Oriental crisis of 1875-1879 the pace of events suddenly accelerated, and the Pomaks, as well as the Orthodox Bulgarians, had to make fateful decisions, for which they were absolutely not prepared. Many tragic and bloody incidents occurred at a time when the Bulgarians had no clear idea of the place they occupied within the Ottoman Empire or of the place they might occupy in an independent Bulgarian state. The contradictions of that period, which many historians today still find confusing, can be seen reflected in the personality of one prominent Pomak leader, Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata (Ahmed aga of Tămraš).

In this article, we shall explore the relationship between the Pomaks and the Christian Bulgarians during the period 1876-1886, as demonstrated not only by the historical facts but also by the interpretations these facts have received in historical works. After a brief discussion of the *nahija* of Rupčos and of Karahodžov family who ruled it in the nineteenth century, we shall analyze the events of the April Uprising of 1876 in relation to the Rhodopes and, in particular, the siege and destruction of Peruštica. The historical polemic concerning the participation of Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata in the massacres that occurred at this time reveals the ambiguity and contradictoriness of the relationship between the Pomaks and the Christian Bulgarians. This ambiguity was strengthened by Ahmed aga's rebellious attitude towards the Bulgarian government of Eastern Rumelia (1879-1886), demonstrated by his annexation of twenty-unsubordinate villages to the so-called "Pomak Republic."⁴

Rupčos and Its Rulers

The *nahija* of Rupčos, a dependency of the *kaza* of Plovdiv, was a part of the central Rhodopes, which comprised the Čaja River basin (now Čepelarska) and the right bank of the River Văča. It extended from the foothills of the Rhodopes, some ten kilometers south of Plovdiv and immediately south of Stanimaka (now Asenovgrad), to the watershed of the Arda basin, where the *kaza* of Ahă-Čelebi began. It included some fifty or sixty villages, and its main seat was in Čepelare until 1832, at which time, with the promotion of Hasan Karahodžov to the post of administrator of Rupčos, it was moved to Tămraš in the north. Hasan aga married a cousin of the influential Salih aga, ruler of the *kaza* of Ahă-Čelebi, and ruled the Rupčos district as his own, maintaining

⁴The most complete work on Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata is that by Angel Vălčev, *Tămraš* (Sofia, 1973). One of the oldest sources of information—but not always reliable—is Hristo pop Konstantinov, *Nepokornite sela*, 2 vols. (Tărnovo, 1887). See also "Iz Rodopite—Rupčos," *Periodičesko spisanie*, nos. 58, 59, and 60 (1899). Three authors reported on visits to the insubordinate villages: the Czech Vaclav Dobruski, *Bălgarija prez pogleda na česki pďtešestvenici* (Sofia, 1894), pp. 64-94; the Bulgarian revolutionary Zahari Stojanov, *Săčinenija*, vol. 3 (Sofia, 1983); and the Englishman Burchier (orthography uncertain) in *Mišal*, nos. 6 and 7 (1894). The historiographers of the Rhodopes, often using accounts passed down orally, give interesting information: see Vasil Dečov, *Minaloto na Čepelare* (Plovdiv, 1978); and Nikolaj Hajtov, *Minaloto na Javrovo, Devin, Manastir* (Plovdiv, 1985), this edition containing also Hajtov's polemical articles on Ahmed aga. On the April Uprising, see Dimităr Strašimirov, *Istorija na aprilskoto vďstanie*, 3 vols. (Plovdiv, 1907), and Hristo Gandev, *Aprilskoto Vďstanie* (Sofia, 1976).

independence from the central administration (in Plovdiv or Istanbul).⁵ He died in 1855 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Ahmed aga.

The wealth of the Karahodžov family came from its large sheep flocks, which moved between the rich Rhodopean summer pastures and the warmer Aegean winter pastures. This wealth and authority of the family was demonstrated by the size of their *konaks*. Hasan aga possessed three estates (*čifliks*), which were divided between his four sons at his death. The first one, south of Tămraš on the southern slopes of Mount Modăr, was inherited by Ahmed aga; the second, inherited by Smail aga, was situated some fifteen kilometers north of Tămraš, in a place called Sredne (the major part of it fell within Bulgaria after the territorial agreement of 1886). The third *čiflik*, attributed in common to Mustafa aga (who soon died) and Adil aga, was in Tikla, also north of Tămraš; Zahari Stojanov saw this estate in ruins in 1885:

It is not just an ordinary *čiflik* of the kind we are used to: it is a palace, a summer residence, a fortress; it reminds us at first sight of the palaces of the feudal rulers which we never saw with our own eyes, but have only read about. Where are the *čifliks* of our *čorbadzi* and civil servants? All these gathered, together in one place might form but one wall of the aga's palace. This palace may have burnt down, but with its crenellated walls, its white chimneys still standing erect above the ruins, high walls decorated with many shooting-windows, two fountains still flowing with the same speed in its courtyard, it bears clear an undisputable witness to the fact that slavery reigned here, that its owner was powerful.⁶

This description should not mislead the reader. The Karahodžov family led the frugal life of all mountain dwellers. Their wives (Pomaks were with few exceptions monogamous) were active housewives, with very little domestic help. Their flocks could probably be counted by the thousands, not by the tens of thousands as was thought by some authors who were misled by the magnifying effect of the oral tradition. However, the prestige of the rulers of Tămraš was indeed immense, and the memory of Ahmed aga is still alive today in the Rhodopes.

Ahmed aga's prestige stemmed not only from his wealth (considerable by Rhodopean standards), but also from his independent attitude towards official authority, which he maintained under Ottoman as well as Rumeliot rule. Ahmed aga was an absolute ruler whose personal decisions were law in Rupčos; but he had also an intuitive feeling for justice, which was appreciated by the local population, Christian and Muslim alike. Many anecdotes about his expeditious decisions have been collected.⁷ Human life did not count for much in his eyes, but honor and order did, and as a result—the fact was noted by the Russian consul in Plovdiv—robbery was unknown within the borders of Rupčos. This did not mean, however, that Ahmed aga had moral scruples about robbery, an activity deeply rooted in the poor mountain dweller's lifestyle—as was revealed during the 1876 events, to the detriment of the neighboring villages. This relationship

⁵ Vălčev, *Tămraš*, p. 88.

⁶ *Săčinenija*, p. 400.

⁷ Hajtov, *Minaloto na Javrovo*, pp. 44-52; Vălčev, *Tămraš*, pp. 111, 113.

between Ahmed aga and his people was picturesquely described by Stojanov, who in 1883, five full years after Bulgaria's liberation, witnessed the reaction to Ahmed's attendance at a dedication ceremony for the monastery of Bjala Cerква (located on the northern slopes of the Rhodopes in a territory ruled by Eastern Rumelia) at a time when the man was leading twenty-one villages in open rebellion against the Plovdiv government:

The news "Ahmedaa is coming" disrupted the calm and passed from mouth to mouth. Even the horo-dancing stopped, the bagpipes grew silent, everybody turned toward the fountain, many thought that a scandal was inevitable and that the crowd would assert its own will.

But Ahmedaa was approaching, mounted on a black horse, in his Juzbaši-uniform, with saber, revolver and some decorations on his chest. His escort was composed of fifteen to twenty Pomaks, who accompanied him from the village. They were armed to the teeth, each with two revolvers, a Winchester held in the left hand, while the other hand rested on the handle of a long yatagan. This escort seemed to have been specially chosen: all handsome young Pomaks, tall as the fir trees of their mountains, with shirts open to the waist like *pehlivans*, with enormous moustaches, the tips of which reached to their eyes. I think that at the least sign of an attack from the Bulgarian side, they were prepared to take position, the yatagan's sharp edge would flicker in the air, the Winchesters would fire and all this despite the fact that the Bulgarians numbered three thousand and the Pomaks fifteen.

But what a wonder. Instead of attack and offense, the Bulgarian peasants, men and women alike, welcomed the aga as if he were master there, as if he were not a rebel but still their *kärserdar*. While he was offering one hand, so that white-haired old men and old grandmothers might kiss it, he was forced to abandon his second hand as well. "welcome, Ahmedaa," "Hoš geldin, aga," "While you were deciding whether to visit us or not, we grew old and you are still young!" Such voices were heard from the crowd, which gathered to welcome its Emperor of forty years. And it is ridiculous to suppose that the Bulgarians did this out of fear, as everybody knew that Ahmedaa was no more their master. Predominant here were feelings of a past grandeur, of present ceremony, of relationship between former slaves, now free people, on the one hand, and, on the other, these now destitute and humiliated.

After a while, the Bulgarian *kabadaiti* reacted. These were rural policemen and *pandurs*, who in the Turkish era had had the ill fate to tremble before Ahmedaa's people, humiliating themselves as servants. In order to demonstrate that they were no longer raja, they began to undulate in a horo before the others. Not just an ordinary horo, but one with a display of knives and pistols, whose handles were protruding. Ahmedaa's people, leaning on each other's shoulders, began to criticize the Bulgarians for still not knowing how to wear knives and ammunition bags. The latter could not stand it any longer. They told the Pomaks, half seriously, half in jest, that God willing Ahmedaa would join them in a pilgrimage to Plovdiv. "Oho, you have thought about this very late in the day, komsular," answered the Pomaks, seizing the handles of their knives.

"Like many people gathered here, you'll have to pass over our dead bodies before you see Plovdiv."

And all such arrogance, on Rumeliot territory, in the presence of 3,000 Bulgarians, in the presence of gendarmes and soldiers! The Bulgarian *kabadaiti* hung their heads.⁸

But we have anticipated our story, showing Ahmed aga's very unique position during the Rumeliot period. Let us go back to the last years of Ottoman rule, to the fateful year of 1876, during which Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata achieved his sinister, world wide reputation.

The April Uprising of 1876: The Events in Peruštica.

The April Uprising of 1876 was an important event in Bulgarian history, but not as important in geographical or military terms as certain nationalistic Bulgarian historians would lead us to believe. It was, in fact, only effective in the region of Sredna Gora (with Panagjurište as center) and, to a lesser degree, in central Stara Planina (Balkan range) and the northern fringe of the Rhodopes. From a strategic point of view, it betrayed very poor, amateurish planning. It was a turning point in Bulgarian political attitude, however. For the first time the Bulgarians seriously envisaged taking their fate into their own hands and playing an active role on the international political chessboard. The uprising had been prepared for more by the spread of national enthusiasm among the population than by any true organization (planned coordination between the various committees abroad and in Bulgaria did not function well when the decisive moment came), and it demonstrated more romanticism than real political thinking. Its main effect was, in fact, indirect, shocking Russian public opinion by the ferocity of the repression and provoking a bellicose response.

The Bulgarian Central Revolutionary Committee had been founded in December 1869 in Bucharest. Its most active member was Vasil Levski, who had the dangerous task of organizing local committees on Bulgarian (i.e., Ottoman) territory and, thus bridging the gap between the country's residents and its emigres. After Levski's capture and execution (February 1873), the Bulgarian committee was disorganized for some time, but the new Oriental crisis that flared up in 1875 in Herzegovina gave it new hope and decided it to act. A first, very localized, attempt at insurrection took place in Stara Zagora (Eski Zağra) in September 1875. For organizational purposes, Bulgarian territory was divided into four operational districts: Tărnovo, Sliven, Vraca, and Plovdiv. As the last was a security risk to the conspiracy—its population being part Turkish and part Greek—the seat of the fourth district was moved to Panagjurište. The main organizers (or "apostles") there were Panajot Volov, Georgi Benkovski, Zahari Stojanov, and Georgi Ikonov. They encouraged patriotic and revolutionary activity in the Bulgarian villages of the northern slopes of the Rhodopes: Batak, Peštera, Bracigovo, Peruštica,

⁸*Sdčtnenija*, p. 398-99.

etc. We shall focus our attention on the last named village, as Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata was bound up with the bloody events that took place there.⁹

The insurrection had been set for 12 May 1876, but the plans were betrayed, and it broke out prematurely in Koprivštica on 2 May (20 April according to the Julian calendar, hence the name "April Uprising"). The news that the national uprising had begun reached Peruštica the following day. From the hills the inhabitants could see villages burning in the plain, not yet knowing whether they were Bulgarian or Turkish. The Ottoman authorities in Plovdiv (Aziz paša), confronted with what seemed to be a general uprising, called on Istanbul for help and decided in the meantime to use the local Muslim population against the rebels. The ill-renowned *başıbozüks* (irregular auxiliary troops) included mainly Turks from the Thracian plain (Plovdiv, Tatar Pažardik, Karlovo, etc.), but also Tcherkess, Muslim gypsies, and (it will be painful for Bulgarian historians to acknowledge this) Pomaks from the Rhodopes.

The Bulgarian population of Peruštica, as in most places during the April events, was not unanimous as to what attitude should be adopted. On one side, the revolutionaries, led by the schoolteacher Petăr Bonev, decided to dig trenches around the villages in order to defend it. On the other side, the more conservative *čorbadžis* (djado Rangel Gačev, etc.) decided to call on the Ottoman authorities in Plovdiv for help. Both sides acknowledged that the main danger was from the roaming *başıbozuk* bands, but there was disagreement between them as to how an attack on Peruštica should be prevented. On 6 May, three Pomaks arrived, sent by Adil aga (some authors assert that they were sent directly by his brother, Ahmed aga) and asking for two cartloads of bread for the *başıbozüks* from the Rhodopes, who were gathering at his *čiflik* at Sredne. At this point the committee members "seized power" in Peruštica and arrested the Pomaks. They were executed the same day, allegedly in retaliation for the murder near the village of a Bulgarian by an Albanian. Peruštica's position in the insurrection was thus established by the shedding of blood. The next day Ahmed aga sent a Bulgarian Christian to enquire about his men, whom the officials of Peruštica denied having seen. They were warned that an attack was being prepared against them, and they could see the flames from the neighboring villages of Bojkovo and Dedovo, set on fire by the Pomak *başıbozüks* of Tămraš, led by Smail aga. They continued to organize the fortification of the village, which counted 648 guns. On the following evening, djado Rangel Gačev arrived from Plovdiv, leading two zapties that had orders to defend Peruštica from attack. They did not stay, however, but left for the neighboring Turkish village of Ustina. (It should be noted that two mounted zapties were sufficient to protect the Bulgarian village of Brestovica from destruction, even though some of its inhabitants had participated in the insurrection.)

On 9 May the *başıbozüks* from Tămraš appeared above Peruštica, burning down the monastery of Sveti Todor. They did not attack immediately because a special commission came from Plovdiv to negotiate with the *čorbadžis* from Peruštica and the

⁹ Our description of the events in Peruštica generally follows the accounts given by Strašimirov, *Istoriija*, and by Georgi Natev in his memoir, *Spomeni* (Sofia, 1976); unfortunately, Natev's complete memoir, published in Plovdiv in 1901, is unavailable, and we have used a reprint edition of a shorter version (about three-quarters of the length of the whole work). Included also among the sources are Vălčev, *Tămraš*; Hajtov, *Minaloto na Javrovo*; and Marija and Manol Manolov, "Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata i za edno tálkuvane na negovata rolja v potušavaneto na Aprilšavoto Văstanie," *Istoričeski Pregled*, no. 1 (1972), pp. 97-109.

Turkish notables from neighboring Ustina. The Bulgarians categorically refused the idea that any of the irregular troops should enter their village, even with the official mission of "protecting" them. The Turkish authorities considered that this was open rebellion, although still not sending any regular army troops to crush it. As the commission was retiring to Ustina, part of the Bulgarian population decided to surrender. When this crowd of notables, women, and children, led by the priests, had come to within fifty steps of the *bašibozuks*, some shots were fired from Peruštica, causing the troops, who had seemed friendly up until that time, to massacre this harmless population.¹⁰ So the fight began, and it was to last five full days, as the inhabitants of Peruštica defended themselves passionately.

The regular army, led by Rašid paša, arrived on the evening of 10 May and began to bombard the village on the following day, demolishing the upper church (Sv. Atanas), so that the population had to seek shelter in the lower church (Sv. Arhangel). During that night and the next some hundreds of people managed to escape from the village. The bombardment continued on 13 May, with an interruption for negotiations at about midday. The three Bulgarian negotiators were, however, shot in the back while returning to the still resisting church. The desperate defense was finally crushed on 14 May and ended in a blood bath.

The uprising cost Peruštica all its 30 houses, burned during the fighting. Shortly after the massacre there were estimates of 1,000 or 1,500 dead.¹¹ Strašimirov gives a list of 208 inhabitants (47 women among them) killed.¹² Being one of the villages destroyed closest to Plovdiv, Peruštica's ruins were visited by many European diplomats and journalists: Walter Baring, the secretary of the British embassy, and Eugene Schuyler, the American consul in Istanbul; journalists Januarius Macgahan, an American, Robert More, an Englishman, and Ivan de Woestyne, a Frenchman, etc. It was also one of the few places where the Ottoman government took some care in rebuilding houses.¹³

Ahmed Aga and Destruction of Peruštica

It is a fact that Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata's name was connected with the suppression of the April Uprising from the very beginning. We find him mentioned in English and French, as well as Russian, diplomatic documents; but it is not always clear what massacre he is supposed to have participated in. He was very often confused with Ahmed aga Barutanlijata, also a Pomak leader, but from the Dospat range of the

¹⁰These shots were fired by Kočo Čestimenski, from Plovdiv; in our view he was in a large part responsible for the bloodshed of the repression. Čestimenski appears to have been a maximalist whose position only made matters worse. In Plovdiv he was the only one (together with D. Sveštarov) to set fire to his shop, a step decided upon by the Committee, to cause a big fire in the main town and to make any return impossible. He openly fired the first shots in Peruštica, causing the massacre (as is reported in George Natev's memoirs). He resisted up until the last moment in the besieged church and killed with his own hand his wife and child before committing suicide. This attitude may be considered heroic, but it was highly uncharacteristic of Bulgarian behavior.

¹¹Macgahan, *Turските зверства в България* (Sofia, 1880), p. 72.

¹²*Istorija*, vol. 3, p. 413.

¹³Macgahan, *Turските зверства*, p. 72.

Rhodopes, who was responsible for the famous massacre of Batak. The American journalist Macgahan writes as early as June 1876 about Peruštica:

This village was captured and burnt down by the Basi-božuks, led by Ahmed aga, who should not be confused with the other Ahmed aga, the even more disgusting massacer of Batak.¹⁴

We find confusion, however, in a report by Prince Ceretelev to Giers in June 1876:

Batak, 700 maisons, détruit par Ahmed aga Tymrychly, près de 2000 personnes y périrent après avoir rendu leurs armes.¹⁵

Russian and French sources agree about other villages:

No. 15: Baikovo, l'école, l'église, 60 maisons, 20 personnes massacrées (commandant Ahmed aga). No. 16: Dedovo, détruit par Ismail aga, frère du précédent.¹⁶

In his report to Lord Derby, dated 7 August 1876, Hutton Dupuis, the British agent writes:

Peroushtitza: with 2 churches and 2 schools, 320 houses, totally destroyed. One of the priests of this village, pope Stoimen, was massacred with his children and followers, while making their submission to the chief of Bashibozouks, Ahmed aga of Tumbrush.¹⁷

Robert More, who visited Peruštica in October 1876 with a bilingual interpreter, reports:

During the time of their being in the lower church three women were sent to tell the commanders, three brothers from Rotroushlon Achmet Aga, Smil Aga, and Adil Aga, that the villagers would surrender. All the three women were shot on their way back.¹⁸

Even though the three negotiators were men, and it is difficult to identify "Rotroushian" with Tamras, the three names of the negotiators are accurately given. The American general consul in Istanbul, Schuyler, also accused Ahmed aga, as was confirmed later by his Bulgarian interpreter.¹⁹

¹⁴Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁵*Aprilsko Văstanie: Sbornik ot dokumenti*, vol. 1 (Sofia, 1954), p. 532.

¹⁶See Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Consulaire et Politique, Philippopolis 1876, pp. 330ff, and *Aprilsko Văstanie*, vol. 1, pp. 532.

¹⁷*Aprilsko Văstanie*, vol. 1, p. 521.

¹⁸R.J. More, *Under the Balkans* (London, 1876), p. 75.

¹⁹Petăr Dimitrov, *Lični Spomeni* (Sofia, 1918), p. 15.

Contemporary Bulgarian sources considered Ahmed aga guilty, although less responsible than the Ottoman officials. In his letter to Dragan Cankov and Marko Balabanov, dated 16 September 1876, the exarchial archimandrit Metodij Kusev wrote:

If the European cabinets want to discover the secrets and to establish that *the destruction in Bulgaria did not occur by chance*, it should be insisted on that an international commission be set up which will investigate firstly the above-named persons [Akif paša, vali from Plovdiv, and Sevket paša, who massacred Bojadžik] as well as Hafuz paša and Rašid paša, and, afterwards, the secondary figures, such as Tosun bey, Ahmed aa Tamrašli, Ahmed aa Barutanli, etc.²⁰

Some ten years later Hristo pop Konstantinov, the first local Rhodopean historian, again accused Ahmed aga, who in the meantime had become leader of the so-called Pomak republic.²¹ However, Bulgarian sources on the events in Peruštica are very rare. One survivor of the massacre, Georgi Natev, wrote his memoirs in 1901, and this almost unique document was to be abundantly used in the polemics of the 1970s.²² (Two later histories of the events in Peruštica were written in 1930 and 1940, both using the last existing oral accounts, but we could not consult these works.)²³

The tendency to exculpate Ahmed aga originated with the local Rhodopean historians. We mentioned in our introduction the very special historical sentiment that has flourished in the Rhodopes. This is probably the region of Bulgaria where local history is most actively studied; there are several publications concerned with the area (*Rodopski Zbornik*, *Rodopi*, etc.). One is aware of a certain exclusiveness, probably due to lengthy geographical and historical isolation, which was unique in Bulgaria (except perhaps in Pirin in Macedonia). In 1924 the most authoritative Rhodopean historian, Vasil Dečev wrote:

We assert and can prove that Ahmed aga did not participate in person in the repression of the rebellion in Peruštica, and did not give any direct or indirect order to cut the throats of the rebels and their innocent wives and children. And this is not all. There is proof that Ahmed aga secretly agreed with the rebels, for many reasons of his own, mainly because he disagreed with the beys and rulers in Plovdiv, especially on questions and problems of a political and administrative character.²⁴

This strange, undocumented statement remained unnoticed until 1958, when Nikolaj Hajtov used it to rehabilitate Ahmed aga, while writing the history of his home village, Javrovo. It is difficult to determine whether Hajtov is first and foremost a man of letters or a writer of local history, for both elements are part of his works. He became

²⁰*Aprilsko Vdstanie*, vol. 1, pp. 566-70.

²¹*Nepokornite sela*, Vol. 1, p. 7.

²²*Spomeni*, pp. 459-93.

²³I. Kepov, *Vdstanieto v Peruštica* (Plovdiv, 1930) and K. Gălălbov, *Istoriia na Vdltanieto v Peruštica* (Sofia, 1940).

²⁴*Rodopski Pisma* (Sofia, 1924), published under the pseudonym, D. Smolyanski, cited in Vălčev, *Tămraš*, p. 165.

famous with his very brilliant *Wild Tales* (1967) but since then has almost renounced writing fiction. His passionate love for his natal Rhodopes, which leads him into partiality; his all too often affirmed confidence in oral tradition; and his tendency to present lively and picturesque descriptions of the past using dialogue and other devices of fiction betray him as no more than a good amateur historian. A remarkable stylist, he is also a ferocious polemicist, whose ultimate argument—even though not thus formally expressed—is, "If you are not a born Rhodopean, you cannot quite understand the whole question." In *Selo Javrovo, Plovdivsko* Hajtov portrays Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata as the defender of the honor of Christian women, as the protector of the Christian raja, and as the one whose authority saved the village of Javrovo from plunder by the *bāsibozuks* in 1876.²⁵ Similarly, he protected Lilkovo, Čepelare, Široka, Lăka, and the monastery of Sv. Petka Muldavska. Hajtov asserts that not Ahmed aga but his brother, Adil aga, was at Peruštica, and that the regular army as well as the Turks from Ustina were responsible for its destruction.

This apologetic point of view, brought to the fore once more with the publication of Dečev's complete works in 1968, provoked reactions from Marija and Manol Manolov.²⁶ They quote oral accounts showing Ahmed aga to be a petty tyrant who exploited the local population through corvée and illegal taxes and protected brigands and murderers. His presence, in Peruštica is proved by both western (Schuyler, etc.) and Bulgarian sources, they point out. Hajtov reacted sharply, for the most part accusing the Manolovs of believing western sources, especially the English Turkophile consuls.²⁷ The publication in 1973 of Colonel Vălčev's detailed book on Tămraš provided support for Hajtov's point of view.

The interesting question is, what lies behind these polemics? In our eyes, the answer is twofold: on the one hand, there is an overestimation of the importance of the April Uprising by the Bulgarian historians; on the other, having made this event so important in their historical narrations, they are confronted with the problem of Pomak participation in the suppression activities that are the major part of the story. The fact is that the April Uprising was comprised of only two narrative elements: the preparation of the insurrection and its crushing. Although the uprising in itself was a very important psychological turning point in the evolution of Bulgarian attitudes, it was too short-lived to develop a real organization or to result in a Bulgarian administration. Thus, the major task remaining to the historians is to describe the suppression of the insurrection, the heroic defense by the Bulgarians, and the merciless massacre and plundering by the *bašibozuks* and the Ottoman army. This scheme of things is very convenient for an analysis of the uprising in the Balkan and Sredna Gora ranges; but the events in the northern Rhodopes plainly implicate Pomak irregulars in the Batak and Peruštica atrocities. This was no real concern for historians up until the Balkan wars, so Konstantinov could openly accuse the Pomaks, and D. Strašimirov could point to their responsibility in a moderate way; but after Bulgaria was definitively confirmed within its present borders, and especially after the Communists took power in 1944, the

²⁵First published as *Selo Javrovo, Asenovgradsko* (Sofia, 1958).

²⁶"Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata."

²⁷"Ošte za Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata i za edno tălkuvane na negovata rolja v potušavaneto na Aprilskoto Văstanie," *Istoričeski Pregled*, no. 5 (1972): 99-100.

integration of the Pomak population became of growing concern. A place had to be ascribed to them in Bulgarian history; but since their islamization in the seventeenth century, the Pomaks actually had played almost no role in that history (if we except the episode of Mehmed Sinap at the end of the eighteenth century). The participation of the Pomaks in Ottoman history, on the other hand, would be extremely interesting to document.

As we pointed out in the introduction, the Pomaks were "discovered" very late by the Bulgarians. The April Uprising was the date of their reentry into Bulgarian history, but, alas, on the wrong side. The fact that this group, who suffered most under the Ottoman regime (having been subjected to "denationalization," although succeeding in preserving their national language and customs), should appear at this "most Bulgarian time" with no national consciousness at all and, what is worse, contribute to crushing of the first Bulgarian attempt at independence, is far too paradoxical for a simplified nationalistic historiography. The whole polemic centered around Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata must be considered in this context: the Rhodopean historians (Dečev, Hajtov, Vălčev) by showing one Pomak leader to have been abusively accused during the uprising will demonstrate the existence of disinformation about the Pomaks; and thanks to the one proven innocent, the weight of the accusation resting on all the Pomaks will be lifted.

Vălčev's argument to explain why all western (and hence many Bulgarian) documents accuse Ahmed aga is quite subtle. It proceeds along the following line. The new regime, after overthrowing Sultan Abdulaziz, placed the responsibility for the Bulgarian massacres—which aroused condemnation in Europe—not only on the former administration but also on the Bulgarians themselves, misled as they were by Russian propaganda. For the main part, however, the blame is cast upon the *bašibozuks* who were called on to repress the insurrection.²⁸ Among the *bašibozuks*, Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata's name has been singled out for special attention because he was an independent local ruler, not over-respectful of Ottoman authority. According to both Valčev and Hajtov, Ottoman officials, supported in this by the English diplomats, sought to put the blame on the heads of the Pomak irregular troops, first, in order to exculpate the regular army and, second, with incredibly far-sighted Machiavellianism, in order to spread animosity between Christian and Muslim Bulgarians. Thus, every historian who supports this Anglo-Turkish point of view is almost a traitor to the Muslim Bulgarians, as Valčev imperturbably asserts:

In our history the position and forgeries of Baring and Co. have long since been known and denied by everyone who honestly seeks the truth. But this does not prevent the Manolovs from referring once more to

²⁸The question of how far the *bašibozuks* obeyed given orders or acted on their own is an important one, but seems one that is unlikely to get a clear response. During this troubled time the Turkish authorities did call upon the *bašibozuks*, but probably without assigning very precise tasks to them. They wanted the rebellion to be crushed; but did they really want one of the most flourishing regions of the Empire to be sacked? Or did they not really care, as long as the first goal was reached? The case of Javrovo, as described by Hajtov, is typical in our eyes: the *bašibozuks* arrived at the village, asked for food and shelter, tried by means of intimidation to obtain money and women, but waited for a signal to begin any real plundering or massacre and left the village untouched when Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata's men came to order them away.

these emissaries, thus consciously or not resurrecting the Anglo-Turkish interpretation of the insurrection. How could we otherwise explain their desire to prove that it was not the official Turkish authorities but the Bašibozuk leaders and, more particularly, Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata who crushed the insurrection; that Rašid paša "arrived late," that he neither commanded the repression nor displayed cruelty, and that all this was the doing of Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata. Wasn't this precisely what the Anglo-Turkish emissaries of the Turkish governmental commission tried to prove? Of course Ahmed aga did not do anything alone, he did not crush the insurrection alone; this was done by the Muslim Bulgarians he led. And from here to the question of the extent to which the Muslim Bulgarians are Bulgarians, there is only one step. If the Manolovs cannot make this step, there will be others ready to do so.²⁹

Hajtov comes to the same conclusion:

The Middle-Rhodopean historian Vasil Dečov, perfectly well understood the intentions of Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata's detractors, such as Hutton Dupuis and the foreign or national historical research workers of the April Uprising who confided naively in him. Moreover, Dečov understood with unmistakable intuition that it was not only a question of a conjunctural diplomatic maneuver, but of a long-lasting, serious accusation of fratricide against our brethren—the Rhodopean Muslim Bulgarians—whom some people 'well-intentioned' towards the Bulgarian nation wanted to drive like some sinister wedge between Bulgaria and the Muslim Bulgarians.³⁰

Now that we have explored the far-reaching political and national considerations that lurked behind the polemical discussion about Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata, let us go back to Peruštica and the bloody days of May 1876. Did Ahmed aga make an appearance in person in Peruštica? Perhaps not, although the proofs of his presence elsewhere at the crucial time—in Tatar Pazardžik (25 kilometers west of Peruštica) or near Stanimaka (Asenovgrad, 25 kilometers east of Peruštica)—are not very convincing. Were the Pomaks of Tămraš present in Peruštica? Yes; all authors are unanimous on this point, even Ahmed aga's defenders. Ahmed aga's brother, Adil aga, the leader, of the Pomak troops was there. The Pomaks of Tămraš remained until the last day, as the only witness, Georgi Natev, states:

The people from Tămraš began the fight with us, they ended it as well.³¹

The Pomaks were not alone in attacking Peruštica; together with them were the Turks from Ustina and Kričim, some Tcherkess, and, from 10 May on, the regular army led by Rašid paša. Do they bear responsibility for the atrocities and, more particularly, for the first massacre of the surrendering notables? Hajtov goes to great pains to explain

²⁹*Tămraš*, p. 158.

³⁰"Ošte za Ahmed aga," p. 109.

³¹*Spomeni*, p. 492.

that the latter was the deed of the Turks from Ustina, one of whose leaders was also named Ahmed aga, surnamed Kărmadži. It seems to us, however, very difficult to attribute responsibility for individual events to any particular protagonist, for the detailed stories we have at our disposal were all recorded twenty-five or more years later. In any event, Rašid paša, head of the regular troops, *can* be accused of refusing to negotiate with the rebels for the sake of protecting the "civilian" population. However, it is evident that Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata had an immense influence on the men he commanded: the expressions "people from Tămraš" and "Ahmed aga's people" were synonymous. Whenever Ahmed aga gave orders to protect a place from plunder, he was obeyed. Apparently he decided not to protect Peruštica, which was beyond the limits of his *nahija* of Rupčos (nor did he protect Bojkovo or Dedovo, which were part of it). It should not be forgotten that Peruštica had provocatively killed three of his men.

This leads us to the underlying question: were Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata and/or the Pomaks as a whole anti-Bulgarian? In the black-and-white thinking of nationalistic Bulgarian historians the answer is either unequivocally "yes" (Manolovs)—because the uprising in Peruštica was crushed by him, or at least by his brother Adil aga, and the Pomak Ahmed aga Barutanlijata was in any event responsible for the massacre of Batak—or, equally unequivocally, "no," (Hajtov, Vălčev)—because he was a harsh but just ruler who protected Christians (as he did during the April Uprising in several towns), so that only some of the Pomaks are to be accused of participation in the atrocities.³²

In our eyes the question of anti-Bulgarian feeling on the part of Ahmed aga does not really arise. As ruler of Rupčos, he exhibited justice and understanding towards his Christian subjects. Why should a Muslim ruler (whether Turk or Pomak) necessarily be a tyrant? Everything leads us to believe that Ahmed aga was a man of order: the most striking feature of his administration was the absence of robbery in his *nahija*. So order must reign between his Muslim and Christian subjects as well. Everyday relations between Christians and Muslims, especially when they spoke the same language, were not necessarily tense and were sometimes even rather cordial. As for robbery, it is probable that he did not object to it in principle, mountaineer from the Rhodopes that he was, as long as it did not interfere with his *nahija's* domestic life. The uprising in 1876 must, in his eyes, have seemed a disruption of order, as well as a good occasion for his young, poor *babaiti* to plunder the rich rebellious villages north of his *nahija*, toward the Thracian plain.

It is not certain that the national character of the April Uprising was fully perceived by the Pomaks. Bulgarian historians begin with the *a priori* idea that national feeling is natural to man; so the national propagandists who were active in Bulgaria from about 1830 onwards must have "awakened" this feeling, which had not ceased to exist since the Middle Ages. We saw that the Pomaks, however, were unaffected by this national awakening. Their feeling of "togetherness," apart from local village or district identity, was derived from Islam; they did have a clear consciousness of their distinctness from the Turkish population, but this was secondary to them. If they perceived the national character of the uprising and if they fought consciously against it, it was for

³²There was a later, ancillary polemic between the Manolovs and Hajtov concerning Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata's role in the 1865 revolt against high taxes in Aha-Čelebi; in this case, the issue was whether he was an anti-social, as well as anti-Bulgarian, leader.

religious, not national, reasons: they might have fought against a "giaur" kingdom, not necessarily against a "Bulgarian" kingdom.

All this is mere hypothesis, as we have no Pomak sources from this time and the few oral records at our disposal were all collected by Christian research workers; but we feel justified in considering the 1876 events in this way because of the behavior of the Pomak population during the period which followed.

The Turco-Russian War of 1877-78 : Ahmed Aga's "Pomak Republic":

The outbreak of the war in 1877, an indirect consequence of the April Uprising, polarized the positions of the various ethnic and religious groups concerned. The Rhodope area was not directly involved in the events of the war until the beginning of 1878. Between 16 and 18 January of 1876 Suleyman paša's army was definitively routed in the foothills of the Rhodopes south of Plovdiv, between Dermendere (Pärvenec) and Stanimaka (Asenovgrad). As it could no longer retreat towards Edirne, it had to take the difficult way south, along the narrow snow-covered shepherds' paths of the Rhodopes. Together with the army, fleeing Muslim civilians tried to reach the Aegean plain by way of the mountains, under the most dramatic conditions. The local Pomak villages were flooded with refugees and disbanded soldiers, who plundered them in order to survive. Seized by the general panic, the Pomaks from Tămraš fled too, fearing reprisals from their Christian neighbors. Through Hvojna and Čepelare, Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata fled to his winter pastures of Kodžaorman in the Aegean plain, after having entrusted all movable goods to his Christian *kehaja*. (This did not prevent the two *čifliks* of Sredne and Tikla from being burnt down.) Most of the Pomaks of Rupčos fled in the same way, except in those villages with mixed populations, where the Christians could guarantee their security, just as they themselves had been protected by the Muslims in 1876.

The panic was not justified, as the Russian army had no intention of occupying the Rhodopes, especially not during the winter. Only two mountain brigades crossed over via the Haskovo-Kărdžali-Komotini and the Stanimaka (Asenovgrad)-Hvojna-Čepelare-Ustovo (Smoljan)-Darădere (Zlatograd)-Kušukavak (Krumovgrad)-Dimotika routes, without leaving behind any garrisons as they passed. On the northern slopes of the Rhodopes the Russian troops hardly penetrated the first villages before the end of January. The Bulgarians themselves raided and plundered, and in this way Tămraš was set on fire. On 31 January the armistice agreed to at Edirne fixed the line of demarcation at the watershed between Marica, Mesta, and Arda, thus according about two thirds of the Rhodopes to the Russians, who had not really set foot there. This diversion was confirmed by the treaty of San Stefano (3 March 1878). At the local level, this frontier line was unacceptable to both the Christian villages on the upper Arda (Ustovo, Rajkovo, etc.), which were left on the side of the Ottoman Empire, and to the Pomak villages that were included in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the decision remained almost hypothetical, as the whole Rhodope area served in fact as a buffer zone between the two armies.

The Rhodope insurrection that began at the end of February was a consequence of this undefined situation. It consisted of a series of skirmishes, directed mainly against

the Christian villages in the regions not effectively controlled by the Russians. Under the leadership of the Englishman S.G.B. Saint Clair, the insurrection went as far as to threaten the railway line near Haskovo, but it was confined to the eastern Rhodopes. It spread later to the west, and the regions of Čepelare and Djovlen (Devin) in Rupčos became involved also, but to a lesser extent than the eastern villages. The local Christian population resisted these incursions under the leadership of Kapitan Petko Vojvoda, a very popular figure, whom the Russians only half trusted. In April 1878 the Russians engaged in some maneuvers in the northern Rhodopes, by which time the third *čiflik* of the Karahodžov family, that of Modăr, had been burned too. In May the insurrection led an offensive in the direction of Čepelare and Stanimaka. This provoked a reaction from the Russians, who penetrated deeper into the mountains, reaching Pavelsko and Savtăște but not as far as Čepelare. The insurrection led by Saint Clair lasted until the end of the autumn of 1878. However, it never reached deeply into Rupčos and hardly affected those villages that were soon to be known as "insubordinate". It is interesting that the Rhodope insurrection should have been led by an Englishman. S.G.B. Saint Clair had formerly been with the British military, and Bulgarian historians assert that the revolt was, in fact, directed by England; however, research has not ascertained the truth of this belief. It is known that Saint Clair was bitterly anti-Russian and disliked the Bulgarians as well. He participated in the Polish insurrection of 1863, and then established himself in the Ottoman Empire: first in Djevarli in the eastern Balkan Range and then on an estate near Cape Emine on the Black Sea. Together with the British vice-consul in Burgas, Ch. A. Brophy, he wrote *A Residence in Bulgaria*, which was published in London in 1867 and republished, under the title *Twelve Years' Study of the Eastern Question in Bulgaria*, in 1877, again in London. His pro-Turkish sentiments are made clear in his book. He served in the Ottoman army in northeast Bulgaria in the 1877-78 war. As leader of the Rhodope insurrection he bore the name Hidaet pasha. Also involved in that revolt were Polish, Spanish (carlist), and other English adventurers.)³³

The treaty of Berlin (13 July 1878) fixed the borders of the newly created autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia, attributing to it the whole *nahija* of Rupčos; but the new authorities soon appeared too weak to take possession of regions where the Russians had not already set up a Bulgarian administration. (Why the Russians omitted to do this in the villages of the Văcă valley before leaving Eastern Rumelia in July 1879 is unknown.) In October 1878 Petko Vojvoda tried to subjugate the southern part of Rupčos (Mugla, Breze, Beden) but was repelled. This was a very troubled period, and it is difficult to evaluate whether he acted on his own, as a local unofficial leader, or under orders. The fact is that he was temporarily arrested by the Russians, who were trying to placate world opinion that was very much against them as a result of Anglo-Turkish propaganda.

It is impossible to say who ruled Rupčos during the autumn and winter of 1878 and the spring of 1879. The region lived in isolation, and the Pomak emigrants

³³See Michael Leo, *La Bulgarie et son peuple sous la domination ottomane tels que les ont vus les voyageurs anglo-saxons* (Sofia, 1949), pp. 30-31, and also James Baker, *La Turquie* (Paris, 1883), pp. 29-31, and Simeon Radev, *Stroitelite na savremenna Bălgarija* (Sofia, 1973), vol. 1, p. 34 and p. 811 (notes by E. Statelova).

gradually came back to their villages. During the spring of 1879 Eastern Rumelia was divided into territorial units by the provisional Russian administration. Within the *okrag* (department) of Plovdiv an *okolija* (district) of Rupčos was thus created, and Grigor Popov, a Bulgarian from Široka Laka, was nominated as *okolijski načalnik* (sub-prefect). This arrangement, however, was immediately changed by Aleko Bogoridi, Eastern Rumelia's new governor general, who arrived in Plovdiv on 27 May and two weeks later nominated the Turk Mehmed bey Karakehajolar to the post. This seems to have been a fatal mistake, resulting in the insubordination of the villages of the Văča valley: it involved the introduction of an administrator foreign to the Rhodopes and, what is more, a Turk, whereas Rupčos had always been ruled by local Pomak leaders. Aleko Bogorodi, coming fresh from Istanbul, underestimated the silent hostility of the poor mountain Pomaks toward the rich beys of the Thracian towns.

To Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata the situation was intolerable: had he not, in the Turkish era, been almost independent of the Plovdiv authorities? Was he to accept a Turkish master, now that his country was in Bulgarian hands? Another mistake was to introduce Turkish as the official language in Rupčos, where the population, although mainly Muslim, was Bulgarian-speaking.³⁴ When, during the summer of 1879, Mehmed bey made his first attempt to be recognized by the villages of the Văča valley, he was stopped at Beden, where the village chief announced to him that a decision about whether to submit to him was to be taken by the neighboring villages. Some days later, indeed, a meeting of all local notables was organized at Trigrad. There the Pomaks of the Văča officially decided not to submit to the Plovdiv authorities and organized their own government, composed of Hadži Hasan of Trigrad, Hadži Mustafa Kjuljunk of Beden, and Molla Ejub of Mugla. The decisive authority was, however, to remain in the hands of the Karahodžov family, and Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata became "president" and his brother, Smail aga, chief of a police force of twenty men. The capital of this "Pomak republic" was at first designated as Nastan and later changed to Tămraš.

How many villages were part of this "Republic?" This is a complex question, as the different authors disagree. There were thirteen to start with: Osikovo, Čurekovo, Mihalkovo, Ljaskovo, Breze, Beden, Nastan, Grohotno, Gjovren, Balaban (now Jagodina), Trigrad, Mugla, and Kjustendžik (Kesten). Four other villages registered by the Rumeliot authorities in 1880 became dissenters in 1881: Čerešovo, Tămraš, Brezovica, and Petvar. These seventeen villages all belonged to the *nahija* of Rupčos. They were subsequently joined by four villages affiliated to the neighbouring *okolija* of Peštera (*okrađ* of Tatar Pazardzik, not of Plovdiv): Selča, Djovlen (now Devin), Karabulak (Borino), and Naipli (Bujново). Vălčev adds to this list the village of Čilikli (now Stomanovo); but it is mentioned by no other author, and our guess is that it was not yet a village in the 1880s, as just before the Balkan Wars it numbered only thirty houses.³⁵ Stojanov and Dobruski list Kajinčală, which lies south on the watershed of the Marica and the Mesta and was thus not part of Eastern Rumelia, as one of these

³⁴ *Marica*, no. 274 (3 April 1881); *Marica* was by that time the best-informed newspaper in Eastern Rumelia. Konstantinov (*Nepokomite sela*, Vol. 1,) considers that, in addition, the highly fanatical Pomaks were shocked by the lax Islamic ways of the urban Turks; but we have no evidence that the Pomaks were such puritans.

³⁵ Vălčev, *Tămraš* p. 283. Hajtov, in *Grad Devin* (p. 290), records an oral account about how Stomanovo became a village, but without any precise date.

insubordinate villages also. Brezovica was, for unknown reasons, not retroceded to the Ottoman Empire in 1886, although it was considered to be insubordinate.

The Rumeliot government was conscious of the problem raised by the Pomak "republic" but clearly decided to solve it in a pacific way. The reason for this attitude was that the Văča valley was not the only rebellious territory in Eastern Rumelia: the district of Kărdžali had been in open revolt since December 1879, and a military expedition of 1,200 men had been sent to pacify it in March 1880. As this action had taken on somewhat excessive dimensions, it had developed into an affair of international renown, compromising the image of the Bulgarian government in the autonomous province. It was nonetheless vital for the government to secure its southeastern border. Comparable incidents took place in May 1880 in the region of the Deli Kamčik River (now Luda Kamčija), following energetic pacification measures the principality of Bulgaria had launched in its own territory.³⁶ The main fear of the young Rumeliot administration had been that some kind of coalition would develop between the Turkish and the coastal Greek populations. Also insubordinate, i.e., refusing to pay taxes, was one mountain village north of Pirdop.³⁷ The sector of the Dospat range known as Babeški Kolibi, where brigands from Macedonia and Eastern Rumelia took refuge, resisted taxation also.

The problem of highway robbery within the "Pomak republic" was the most decisive element in favor of action on the Rumeliot side;³⁸ it was not so much the taxes these poor mountain villages refused to pay or the danger of rebellion spreading—as in the Kărdžali district—across valleys which hardly communicated with each other. However, the area being very difficult to reach, "pacification" might be difficult. During the first half of 1880 the Rumeliot government, which had had to intervene in Kărdžali and Deli Kamčik and had earned only criticism for this, remained totally inactive towards the Văča valley. It decided to resort to diplomacy. After a correspondence between Aleko Bogoridi and the Sublime Porte, a meeting was organized, in December 1880 in Djovlen (Devin), between the prefect of Tatar Pazardžik, Ivan Najdenov, and the *mutesarif* of Seres, who came escorted by Ahmed aga Barutanlijata, the slaughterer of Batak.³⁹ A document of submission was signed, but it soon became obvious that the Porte had no desire to see the affair settled. One of its devices in negotiation was always to separate the four villages affiliated to Peštera (which, in Ottoman eyes, fell under Nevrokop administration, *vilayet* of Thessaloniki) from the seventeen villages of Rupčos (under the authority of the *vilayet* of Edirne), even though there was no doubt that all of them were to become Rumeliot. In June 1881, Aleko Bogoridi went to Istanbul and pleaded the Rumeliot cause before the Porte and the foreign ambassadors, accusing the Ottoman administration of collecting taxes from the insubordinate villages. He only succeeded, however, in displaying the inefficiency of his administration. By this time public

³⁶Bernard Lory, "Problèmes du brigandage en Bulgarie 1878-1883," in *Părvi Meždunaroden kongres po bālgaristika. Dokladi. Bālgarskata dārzdva prez vekovete, I* (Sofia, 1982), pp. 510-15.

³⁷Vălčev, *Tāmraš* p. 252.

³⁸*Marica*, nos. 319, 369, 430, 629, etc.

³⁹N. Hajtov erroneously gives 29 May as the date of this meeting (*Grad Devin*), p. 278). Vălčev, (*Tāmraš*, p. 245) gives the date of 3 December 1880, but places the meeting at Selča. We adopt here the version of Konstantinovc *Nekopornit, sela*, vol. 2, and *Marica*, no. 294 of 16 June 1881).

opinion in Eastern Rumelia had begun to react to the situation, and the affair was submitted to the regional parliament.⁴⁰

Paradoxically, the populations of the Văča villages were not unanimous in approving the insubordination. Let us not forget that Ahmed aga was a derebey, who, despite a certain sense of justice, always put his personal interests first. In July 1880 the frontier commission had reported that the villages were ready to submit, but that they were terrorized by Ahmed aga Barutanlijata.⁴¹ During the summer of 1882, a delegation of five inhabitants of Naipli came to Peštera asking that their village and Karabulak be administrated by Eastern Rumelia.⁴² The village chief of Djovlen, was murdered for having asked that his village be integrated.⁴³ In the autumn of 1884 it was the turn of Mugla: Mehmed bey went there to organize the new administration but was expelled from the village by Hadži Ahmed Kjuljank of Beden.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it seems that even Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata himself would not have been opposed to submitting to Plovdiv, provided that he was named *okolijski načalnik* of Rupčos. Konstantinov is very harsh towards the Rumeliot authorities (whom he knew well, being secretary at the regional parliament):

However, as a result of certain Byzantine considerations, the Rumeliot rulers did not agree to accord him this function. If Tămrašlijata had been given an autonomous service in Rupčos by Plovdiv, peace and tranquility would have reigned from the very beginning in that mountainous region.⁴⁵

Our guess is that the "Byzantine considerations" were nothing less than the accusation that Ahmed aga had participated in the massacre of Peruštica, concerning which neither Konstantinov nor the Czech Dobruski, who visited Ahmed aga in Tămraš at that time, are in any doubt. If he was an innocent as Dečev, Hajtov, and Vălčev claim, why should the Rumeliot administration have balked at this very obvious solution? Why should it have entangled itself in humiliating negotiations with the Porte, from which it could expect nothing? In addition, the visit Ahmed aga made with his guards to the monastery of Bjala Cerkva in August 1883, as described by Stojanov, was not just that of a village chief refusing to pay taxes but that of a man who, if caught, was liable to be judged and perhaps condemned. So we can suppose that the "Byzantine considerations" involved questions of amnesty Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata had requested for himself (if he was guilty), or for his brothers Adil and Smail aga.

As the Rumeliot administration refused to acknowledge the autonomous status of the Văča villages through recognition of Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata's authority, and at the same time refused to intervene in force, the Ottoman government exploited the situation

⁴⁰The first explicit article on this question was published (in French) in *Marica*, no. 294 (16 June 1881).

⁴¹*Marica*, no. 202 (22 July 1880).

⁴²*Marica*, no. 245 (28 August 1882).

⁴³Konstantinov, *Nepokornite sela*, vol. 1, p. 39. Hajtov quotes this fact in his monograph without any detail, omitting even the name of the murdered mayor (*Grad Devin*, p. 282).

⁴⁴*Marica*, no. 657 (12 October 1884).

⁴⁵*Nepokornite sela*, vol. 1, pp. 6-7; also vol. 2, p. 30.

for its own ends. The traditional taxes were collected by local (insubordinate) officials and paid to the Ottoman administration of the *kaza* of Aha-Čelebi.⁴⁶ For this reason the Plovdiv authorities threatened to reduce the tribute to the Porte by £10,000. The Porte answered that if this occurred, it would not consider the insubordinate villages to be part of Rumelian territory. According to Antoine Drandar, the Porte had already begun to recruit soldiers in the insubordinate villages in 1884.⁴⁷

In August 1885 Zahari Stojanov made a mysterious visit to Ahmed aga in Tămraš. By that time Stojanov was actively preparing the Plovdiv revolution, which occurred only one month later on 18 September 1885. The revolutionary committee had to make sure that the Pomak republic would remain neutral towards the planned coup. It feared a military intervention from the Ottoman side, which was enabled to take such measures by the provisions of the treaty of Berlin. By coming along the insubordinate Văča valley, an Ottoman army could arrive unhindered at only a few hours distance from Plovdiv. Some days after this visit, Ahmed aga's son Hasan is said to have had a secret meeting in Dermendere with the opposition leader Georgi Stranski. Little more is known about these contacts. What did Ahmed aga ask in return for his neutrality? Was the function of *okolijski načalnik* still tempting for him? Or had the retrocession of the Văča valley to the Ottoman Empire already been decided by that time? If the latter were the case, this would tarnish the image of Stojanov as a pure patriot, but it does not seem incompatible with his pragmatic view of politics. The silence about these negotiations was probably due to the violent campaign of protest organized during the spring of 1886 against the Petko Karavelov government responsible for the return of the territory to the Ottomans.⁴⁸

The history of the Plovdiv coup, the negotiations which followed it, the Serbo-Bulgarian war, and the negotiations leading to the Tophane convention of 5 April 1886 are well known, unlike the history of the insubordinate villages during the crisis. Immediately after the coup, a military detachment led by Captain Karaulanov tried unsuccessfully to occupy the "Pomak republic." Vălčev maintains that the Porte then proceeded overnight to occupy both the Văča villages and the Kărdžali district.⁴⁹ This seems highly improbable, as it would have meant a violation of the borders fixed by the treaty of Berlin and could not have passed unnoticed by diplomatic observers. The Ottoman army massed eighty *tabors* on the Rumeliot border but continued to respect it.⁵⁰ On 19 September the sultan gave an explicit order against any aggression on the part of the regular army or the local Muslim population against Eastern Rumelia.⁵¹ Konstantinov gives a slightly different account, but with little more detail:

⁴⁶The tax system had been reorganized in Eastern Rumelia, so people thought they were paying more than previously.

⁴⁷*Les événements politiques en Bulgarie depuis 1876 jusqu'à nos jours* (Brussels and Paris, 1896), pp. 373-81.

⁴⁸Vălčev, *Tămraš*, pp. 261-70.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁵⁰*Istoriija na srăbsko-bălgarskata vojna 1885* (Sofia, 1971), p. 46.

⁵¹*Dokumenti za bălgarskata istorija*, vol. 4, *Dokumenti iz turskite dăržavni arhivi (1863-1909)* (Sofia, 1942), p. 65.

The insubordinate villages of Rupčos, as well as the district of Kărdžali, were declared by the Porte to be under siege. The Pomaks, armed by the Turkish government, guarded their border with the help of Turkish soldiers.... From 6 September 1885 [Julian calendar] to 26 March 1886, the Pomaks of the insubordinate villages were vigilant.⁵²

In January 1886, after the Bulgarian victory over Serbia, the Turkish representative in Sofia, Gabdan efendi, communicated to Prince Alexander von Battenberg the Ottoman conditions for the regularization of bilateral relations. The eleventh condition was the return to Ottoman administration of the insubordinate villages, the Kărdžali district, and the harbor of Burgas. This was unofficially agreed to by Prince Alexander, with the exception of the cession of Burgas.⁵³ The negotiations continued in Istanbul between Grand Vizier Said paša, the Bulgarian foreign minister, Ilija Canov, and the representatives of the Great Powers, resulting in the Tophane convention (5 April 1886), the second article of which stipulated as follows:

As long as the administration of Eastern Rumelia and of the Principality of Bulgaria are in the hands of only one and the same person, the Muslim villages of the Kărdžali canton, as well as the Muslim villages lying in the Rhodopean region and left till now outside of the administration of Eastern Rumelia, will be separated from this province and administrated directly by the Imperial Government.... The delimitation of this canton and the villages in question will be executed by a technical commission, named by the Sublime Porte and the Bulgarian Prince. This will be done on the spot, naturally taking strategic conditions into account, and especially those of the Imperial Government.⁵⁴

So the uncertain fate of the insubordinate villages was at last decided. Were they consulted in these negotiations? We do not know. We do not know either exactly when their territory was occupied by Ottoman troops. They lost the privileges of their intermediate position and soon discovered the disadvantage created by borders. For seven years they managed to live without borders, either to the north, in the direction of Plovdiv, where they could sell their wool, wood, and tar, or to the south, where their winter pastures lay. The new border transformed them into an appendage of the Ottoman state, a mountainous enclave deep in Bulgarian territory, and this was to cause their economic decline.

The fear of losing their Aegean winter pastures is often pointed to by Bulgarian historians as an argument to explain the insubordination of the Văča valley villages. Stock-breeding was undoubtedly the main occupation of the region, and a statistical report dating from the eve of the Balkan wars indicates that the region had 116,000 sheep and goats and 28,600 horses and cows to about 10,000 inhabitants.⁵⁵ It is convenient to assert that the Văča Pomaks had to refuse the Rumeliot administration in order to preserve their wealth, even though they had no national objection to the

⁵²"Iz Rodopite - Rupčos—*Periodičesko Spisanie*, no. 60 (1899): 911.

⁵³Radev, *Stroitelite*, vol. 1, pp. 726-27.

⁵⁴*Bălgarskata dăržavnost v aktove i dokumenti* (Sofia, 1981), p. 268.

⁵⁵Vălčev, *Tămraš*, p. 282.

Bulgarian state: historical materialism and nationalism are thus reconciled. But these two issues are separate. The economic point of view undoubtedly carried immense weight in the decision not to submit; but the fact that neighboring villages, with a comparable economy, took the opposite decision shows that there was no economic determinism involved. The ideological aspect of the question also had its importance: the neighboring villages had mixed populations of Christians and Muslims, whereas the insubordinate villages were purely Muslim (see map following this article).

In any event, whether subordinate or insubordinate, pro-Bulgarian or pro-Turkish, all Rhodopean villages entered a period of decay after 1878. The real disaster was the drawing of a frontier line that cut this very fragile mountain economy off from the Thracian, or the Aegean, plains. The provisional solution found by the Văča villages was initially to refuse any outside administration, which would have meant the establishment of borders. Why did they then accept integration into the Ottoman Empire? With that realignment they became an eccentric salient of Ottoman territory, lost their Thracian market because of customs regulations, and became dependent upon Drama, when Plovdiv was only six hours by foot from Tămrăs; they were thus economically doomed. The answer is quite simple: villages of the Văča valley submitted to Ottoman authority because they were under military occupation. Their independence up until 1886 had been due almost entirely to the weakness of the Rumeliot regime.

As for the ideological factor, a clear preference was shown by the Pomaks for the Ottoman regime at the end of the nineteenth century, as is proved by the emigration movements of the Rhodopean population. The Pomaks of Rupčos began to emigrate into Ottoman (later Turkish) territory from the beginning of the 1880s, leaving the villages of Sitovo and Pavelsko. This movement continued during the following thirty years as villagers from Narečen, Hvojna, and Orehovo emigrated. Then the main emigration flow was provoked by the Balkan Wars, and the villagers of Borovo, Pavelsko, Savtăște, Mihalkovo, Stojkite, Naipli, Dospat, etc. were on the move. The Pomak population of Beden, however, emigrated northward to the Thracian plain.⁵⁶

The history of the Pomak "republic" from 1886, when it became the *nahija* of Tămraș under the authority first of the *kaza* of Nevrokop, *vilayet* of Thessaloniki, and later of the *kaza* of Komotini, *vilayet* of Edirne, is little documented before 1912. A Turkish garrison was organized at Djovlen (Devin), and frontier posts were set up in the surrounding area. Life became more difficult. Tămraș, the biggest of the insubordinate villages with 350 houses, was at the tip of the salient, surrounded by the border on three sides. The old Ahmed aga Tămrașlijata died during the autumn of 1895. His brother Adil aga had already been directing local affairs for about ten years and remained a leading figure up until 1907 or 1908, when his eldest son Atem took over. By the time the Balkan War broke out, the wealth of the Karahodžov family had considerably declined. The old Smail aga died in 1913 in Smoljan, totally ruined economically.⁵⁷

On 5 October 1912 the tip of the salient was attacked by the Bulgarian army. The population fled southward, leaving Tămraș deserted. The inhabitants of the neighboring Bulgarian villages—Lilkovo, Čuren, Orehovo, Sitovo, Dedovo, Bojkovo, Sotir, Brezovica, and Peruštica—arrived to plunder it. It seems that those from Peruštica,

⁵⁶ Anastas Primovski, *Bit i kultura na rodopskite Bălgari* (Sofia, 1973), pp. 114-55.

⁵⁷ Vălčev, Tămraș, pp. 271-93.

coming from further away and finding it impossible to carry off much booty, set fire to the village. So vengeance was wrought for the 1876 events. Tămraš was totally destroyed and never reconstructed. Its inhabitants were resettled in Turkey, near Izmir, near Edirne in the village of Elegöl, and near Çumra in a village that was given the name Tămraš.⁵⁸

Thus ends the story of Tămraš. As we have already pointed out, the villages of Rupčos were left with rather positive memories of Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata. In Bulgarian historiography, and especially in Bulgarian literature, his name became synonymous with "bloody plunderer." In the last chapter of his masterwork, *Under the Yoke* (1894), Ivan Vazov tells that Ahmed aga even carried the severed heads of men and women on spears; and in a short story broadly inspired by the figure of Ahmed aga, Anton Strašimirov reports the legend of a child burnt alive in order to cure the flocks of disease ("Ramadanbeg's konak," 1901)—that legend being ascribed to Ahmed aga. In Genčo Stoev's novel *The Price of Gold* (1965), Ahmed aga's personage as destroyer of Peruštica is, very interestingly, tempered by his rivalry with the Turks: the Manichean element that usually irritates one in Bulgarian historical novels here gives way to a deeper, tragic vision of history.

It is not the historian's task to judge whether Ahmed aga Tămrašlijata was "bad" or "good." As a historical personage, this local derebey did not play a very important role. We have chosen to focus on him, however, because in the light of his personality the problem of the relationship between Christian Bulgarians and Pomaks is vividly perceptible. The Pomaks are but a small ethno-cultural group, scattered through many provinces, mainly in poor, mountainous regions. Their unique character resulted from a process of islamization, which integrated them with the Islamic structures of the Ottoman Empire. This process was, however, religious and not national. Bulgarian nationalism developed along different lines. It was first bound up with religious considerations (quarrels with the Greek clergy about liturgical language, etc.) and deeply marked by Orthodox Christianity. Later on, laic elements grew more important (language, consciousness of historical past, politics, etc). It was in terms of this new perspective that the Pomaks found their place in Bulgarian national ideology. As they were claimed by the Bulgarians for national reasons, they were simultaneously claimed by the Ottoman Empire for religious reasons. During the period considered here—the last quarter of the nineteenth century—the religious element was predominant; but this by no means prejudiced the evolution of group consciousness among the Pomaks at a later date.*

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 331

* The map following was drawn by me, incorporating information on boundaries and populations gathered from various sources, including works cited in the text (Primovski, *Bit i kultura*; Vălčev, *Tămraš*; Hajtov, *Selo Devin*). Other sources are Stojū Šiškov, *Pomacite v trite oblasti Trakija, Makedonija i Mizija* (Plovdiv, 1914); Stefan Zahariev, *Geografiko-istoriko-statističesko opisanie na Tatar-Pazardžiškata kaaza* (Sofia, 1973); and Tefvik Guran, *Structure économique et sociale d'une région de campagne dans l'empire Ottoman vers le milieu du XIX siècle* (Sofia, 1979).

